

THE PLAINFIELD CHRONICLES



Oscar and the Wolf





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The Plainfield Chronicles

Oscar and the Wolf

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Because we could.

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the waking undead

The world is dark and quiet, waiting for something to be born. Something not quite alive, but not quite dead. A low mist crawls along the alleys of the town. A crow screeches down the dawn. Weak light seeps slowly into a cellar, where a patch of soil lies before a granite stone. Grass and mushrooms grow in tufts and clusters. The moist dirt is clotted, clumped, and freshly dug.

A blade of grass twitches, stills. It shivers again. Worms pause. Beetles wait. Suddenly, the grass across the dirt plot commences dancing. A small mound swells and falls. The world holds its breath. It waits. It waits. It waits...

Soil sprays upward. First dirt, then pebbles, then clods shower up and out as a fist punches from below into the rank air of morning. The fist flexes. It extends its fingers. Another fist bursts to the surface followed by forearms, elbows, shoulders, torso, and a face – an undead face moaning, “Brains... Brains... BRAINS!”

Chapter 1

happy unearhtday, scarlet

Scarlet Bone blinked slowly awake. “I *love* that dream,” she croaked. She knew it was a dream, but still she licked her lips thinking of those juicy brains. “Just dirt,” she sighed, leaning back against her granite headboard and yawned.

A worm wove through the toes of her left foot, wiggling gently in the soil. Scarlet inhaled and let the fetid scent of morning dirt and overnight mushrooms enter her nosehole.

She put her green fingers to her cheeks and began to tap her face and pat her hair. *I wonder if I look any different*, she thought. She rose quickly out of her dirtbox and lurched to her makeup table. Among the perfume flasks, blush tins, and mascara tubes, there was just enough room for one framed picture: her mother, in the full blossom of young-womanhood, on a long-ago misty day, twirling in a cape that shimmered black and white in ivy-pattern arabesques.

She leaned forward, pulled down her cloth dirtmask and inspected her face with growing disappointment. "Hollow cheeks: same. Dark circles under my eyes: same. Tangly, matted hair: same. Brownish teeth: same. Adorable nosehole: same. Samesamesame! How boring! I don't look a day older."

Scarlet smacked her thighs with balled fists. "GARR!" Clouds of dirt and two worms fell from her nightshirt to the floor. The worms — heeding an intelligence they're not often given credit for — hustled back to the sanctuary of the dirtbox. Wriggle-wriggle. Scarlet shambled back to the edge of her bed and sat slumped there, chin in her palms, staring at the trail of dirt she'd made between her bedmat and the vanity table. Her mother, Daisy, would be miffed, she thought. Her father, Dr. Sigmund, would remind her of the rule for tracking dirt through the house, she thought. Scarlet sighed, and her sighing tickled the back of her throat. She coughed out a little dirt that had worked its way past her dirtmask while she slept, blew a megabooger out her nosehole and flicked it into her dirtbox for the worms to munch.

The door at the top of the stairs banged open and her parents' voices came rolling down.

"Happy unearhtday to you," sang Daisy. "Nyunnn-nyunnn!" Dr. Sigmund chimed in as the two descended the stairs.

“Honey, your jaw!” whispered Daisy. Dr. Sigmund looked confused for a minute before he understood. He reached for the holster inside his tweed jacket, unsheathed his portable brass jawbone, and snapped it into place. Click-CLACK.

“Happy unearthday to you,” they sang together.

“Happy unearthday, dear Scar-let.”

“Happy unearthday to you.”

“Hi-YA!” yelled Dr. Sigmund.

“Stinky socks!” shouted Daisy.

The two of them had stopped at the bottom of the stairs, already dressed for the day. Their faces fell as they noticed Scarlet’s mood.

“Darling, what’s wrong?” asked Daisy. “It’s your unearthday!”

“Nothing,” muttered Scarlet.

“*Nothing* nothing, or *something* nothing? Tell me, how do you feel?” asked Dr. Sigmund.

A smile flickered briefly at Scarlet’s lips. “Okay. Something nothing. It’s just that I don’t feel any different. I kind of thought I’d wake up and feel... I don’t know. More grown-up.”

Daisy and Dr. Sigmund shambled over to the bed and sat down next to Scarlet. Daisy’s eyes darted briefly to the dirt trail on the floor. She looked like she was going to say something to Scarlet about the dirt, but then appeared to change her mind. Daisy took Scarlet’s hand

in her own.

"It doesn't happen in a bolt of lighting," said Daisy. "Be patient."

"Besides," said Dr. Sigmund. "After your adventure today you may feel plenty grown-up."

"What do you mean?" asked Scarlet.

"Come upstairs," said Daisy. "We'll fill you in."

"We're making brainwaffles," sang Dr. Sigmund, slapping her knee. "It's the House of Bone unearhtday special."

Daisy and Sigmund each kissed the top of Scarlet's head and got up. Scarlet stood with them and shuffled toward the bottom of the stairs.

"Where are you going?" said Daisy.

"Uh, brainwaffles... ?" said Scarlet.

"You know the rules," said Dr. Sigmund. He wagged his finger at a book on Scarlet's dresser called *The Rules: How to Act in Every Situation*, by Hubris R. Rottenstuff. "And if you forget, look in the book."

"Your father's right, Scarlet. Brush your skin. Rake the bed. Feed the moldfish." Scarlet glanced at Chucky, swimming quietly in his murky tank.

"Even on my unearhtday?"

"Oh, yes!" said Daisy. She and Dr. Sigmund started up

the stairs.

“The road to adulthood,” said Dr. Sigmund, “begins with chores.”

“Now hurry hurry,” said Daisy. “The clock is ticking. Oh, and *please* don’t forget to clean the dirt off the floor.”

Clomp clomp clomp her parents marched back upstairs.

What’s the hurry? thought Scarlet, standing on her bedmat.

She didn’t need to look at the chore list to know what it said: “Brush early and fast to make your skin last. Dirt goes in the bed, not on your head.” And then, as was her habit, Scarlet began to think of something else. *What did Mom and Dad mean about my “adventure”?*

She grabbed the hard-bristle handbrush from the hook beside her bed and gave her skin a brisk going-over.

Maybe they’ll take me to Elysian! Elysian was the best stall in the market. Dresses, capes, and coats. Buckets of bangles! Bins of beads! Baskets of baubles! Racks and trays and display cases. Shiny, shimmery, new. *I wonder if the cape will still be there. The dreams-cape.*

Scarlet took the soft-bristle brush and ran it across her forearms to get rid of the fine dirt and sand, which drifted to the mat below.

That’s got to be it! They’re taking me on a shopping adventure. The girls in the Threadheads Club are going to be so jealous. Yessss!

Her mouth began to water as she thought of how the girls in the Plainfield Sewing Club for Girls — which everyone called the Threadheads — would react.

Scarlet turned to Chucky. “Mom and Dad *know* I’ve been wanting the dreams-cape for, like, ever. Chucky, it’s so amazing. The fabric is, ohmygosh, so soft. It’s like Grandma’s hands. And the color. I don’t even know how to describe it. It’s like moonlight. On the river. Can you imagine me in that cape? *Then* I’d look grown-up. I’ve been telling Flatula and Sparkle and Spangle — and Jeminy — that I was going to get the cape for my unearthday. They didn’t believe me. Especially Jeminy. Ha!”

Scarlet brushed herself a little faster. She lifted her right foot off the mat and swept it clean. She did the same with her left foot. Last, she took the bufferbrush from the hook and rubbed Muffy’s Buffin’ Dust into her skin for the softness.

She was lost in thought, picturing herself in the cape — looking amazing, of course.

Scarlet lifted the bedmat, creased it, and dumped the dirt back into her bedbox. Some of it fell back to the floor. She scuffed the dirt around the floor with her foot, then slipped into her favorite day dress — light blue with a spiderweb pattern traced out in bright sequins.

She dug her scoop into Chucky's chum bucket, slopped in his breakfast. Scarlet was at the bottom of the stairs when she remembered one last chore: Rake the bed. "Argh," she grimaced, and marched back to the bed. Still, she was too wrapped in her daydream to feel annoyed. She opened the bottom drawer of the bedbox, pulled out the bedrake, and smoothed the dirt and sod. Sort of. Actually, she left it lumpy and clumpy, not level like *The Rules* suggested. "Good enough," she shrugged, tossing the bedrake back in the drawer.

"Your waffles are ready," called Daisy from upstairs.

Scarlet hurried upstairs, smiling and about to be hugely disappointed.

Chapter 2

do NOT eat the beetles

Haggis? *That's my adventure?*"

"*Project haggis,*" corrected Daisy.

"You're joking, right? I mean, I love a sheep's innards stuffed in its stomach as much as Grandma. But that's what I get to do for my unearthday adventure? My thirteenth unearthday? Seriously?"

"Oh, no. We're totally serious," said Dr. Sigmund, taking a bite of brainwaffle. "Mmmpf, zees-R *gooo*," he said to Daisy.

"They are good," she agreed. "Scarlet, Dear. Trust us."

Scarlet skated the bit of waffle at the end of her fork across the syrup on her plate, suddenly not feeling very hungry.

"So, let me get this straight: You want me to go shopping at the Plainfield Sanitary Market, buy a haggis, and schlep it through the woods to Grandma's in time for my party, which, by the way, will feature Jeminy," grumbled Scarlet.

“Yes,” said Daisy. “And it will not *feature* Jeminy. She’s there because she’s a Threadhead...”

“... and because her mom’s your boss,” mumbled Scarlet to her waffle.

“... and the Threadheads are a team. You’ll see. It’s going to be great.”

“Yeah, for you guys. *I’m* doing all the work.”

Dr. Sigmund swallowed, set down his fork and touched Scarlet’s wrist. “Trust us.” She pulled her wrist away. “You should get there about five o’clock,” he said. “We’ll meet you there. The party starts at six.”

“Tell me again why you guys aren’t coming with me?”

“Your father has patients to see today,” said Daisy, “and I have an open house. Don’t worry, we’ll give you money for the haggis.”

“Plus a bit extra so you can get yourself something, right Dear?”

Dr. Sigmund looked at Daisy, who nodded back at him.

Scarlet sat up, eyes bright. “Yes? How much extra?”

“What do you think, Daisy? Four bones?”

“I think five, Sig. It is a special day. How does that sound, Scarlet?”

The cape cost one hundred bones.

Scarlet pointed her index finger at her mouth and made a

retching sound.

“Scarlet, the world doesn’t revolve around you just because you have an unearthday.”

“Well, it should,” she huffed.

Dr. Sigmund leaned back in his chair. “Scarlet, if you meet the day with the right frame of mind, it will be full of rewards.”

“That helps. Not.” Scarlet pushed away from the table and clomped out of the kitchen.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Daisy asked.

Scarlet groaned, wheeling slowly around. She grabbed the dishes and took them to the sink, then started to clomp away again.

“And...” said Daisy, holding her hands up and wiggling her fingers.

Scarlet glared at her mother then glared down at her palms, flecked here and there with drops of syrup and crumbs of brainwaffle. She shambled over to the kitchen counter for beetling.

Daisy had neatly stenciled an instruction sheet to the wall behind the sink. At the top it said: “Hands: 5 Steps for Cleaning.” Below that, there was a slogan: *Love the Zombie, Hate the Mess. Clean Your Hands and They’ll Rot Less!* And below that, a list of five instructions.

1. insert hands into beetle box.

Scarlet put her hands into the box. The beetles swarmed ravenously over her skin, twitching their antennae and looking for skinbugs and leftover food.

2. wait one minute for a thorough cleansing.

Scarlet watched, bored, as the second hand began to sweep around the kitchen clock. Her mind drifted. She imagined herself at the party. *I'll breeze in. They'll all look up in, like, total amazement. Even Jeminy, though she'll try to look all un-amazed.* The beetles tickled as they nibbled. Scarlet took her clean hands out of the box, shaking off the clingers. They dropped happily back into the box. Except one.

3. return any escaped beetles to the box.

The beetle made a break for it, high-stepping toward the kitchen sink, the drain, and freedom. Scarlet quickly cupped a hand over him. She looked slowly over her shoulder. Dr. Sigmund and Daisy were flipping through *The Plainfield Chronicle*.

Scarlet gulped the beetle, ignoring the capitalized words under step 3 that said:

DO NOT EAT THE BEETLES!

She burped softly and picked an antenna out of her front teeth.

4. spackle skin.

Scarlet inspected her palms. Green and healthy. She looked at the back of her hands. There were a few small cracks on the knuckles. She lifted the lid off the jar of Nick Trickle's Quick Spackle and used the hand trowel to paste the sticky salve over her nicked knuckles.

5. test spackle.

Scarlet flexed her fingers. Dry and healthy. She left the kitchen.

Daisy called after Scarlet. "Don't forget to bring your red cloak today!"

Scarlet's reply was a growl, just loud enough for her parents to hear.

Chapter 3

the cloak smelled like squirrel pee

Scarlet kept her best capes, cloaks, and dresses in the front of her closet. But she now reached into the back of the closet, way past her out-of-fashion dresses, too-small trousers, and a pair of overalls she'd always hated. She slid the clothes aside and pulled out the least fashionable thing she owned: a hideous red cloak. The nasty, thick, ungainly, torn, stiff, stained, floppy-hooded cloak with the beaded resinous outer coating. Scarlet flexed her nosehole in disgust. The cloak smelled like squirrel pee.

To say it was a hand-me-down cloak would be unfair to hand-me-downs. This cloak had been torn, stained, ripped, stitched, mended, cleaned, sewn, and water-sealed for so long that no one could remember when it was first made or what it had originally looked like.

“Hand-me-downs. *Bleck!* Why does Mom make me keep this thing? I know it’s traditional, but maybe it’s time for a new tradition.”

Scarlet nevertheless threw the ancient garment onto her dirtbox and got herself ready to meet the morning. Daisy, ever the list-maker, had tacked a “body maintenance” instruction sheet to the vanity mirror. Scarlet glowered at it, even though she knew what it said: “Moss Teeth. Tame Hair. Snake Nosehole. Seal Apertures.”

Scarlet sat down at her makeup table. She opened the tin of mouth moss, scrubbed a tuft across her teeth, then chewed it into a soft ball of cud. She worked it around in her mouth, leaned her head back, then jerked it forward. Ptooey. The cudball flew across the room and landed with a *bloop* in Chucky’s tank.

Before Scarlet had inherited the cloak, it belonged to Daisy. Before that, to Grandma Bone. And before that it had belonged to a long line of great grandmas disappearing into the distant past. Scarlet had twice tried to put the cloak in the donation box for the CROAK (the City Refuge for Orphaned and Abandoned Kids). Daisy had found the cloak both times and warned Scarlet that a third would mean her removal from the Threadheads.

Scarlet pulled the Head Scratcher-brand comb out of her hair-care caddy and started plowing through the tangled thickets of her hair. When she had gotten her mop more or less under control, she spooned on several glops of Gellacious Wild Hair Tamer, then coated everything in half a bottle of Mister Spritzer Rain Resister. Her hair looked like

a helmet, but at least it was tame.

Every woman in the Bone family wore the cloak and then handed it to the next girl in line. The idea was to wear it, live some stories in it, and pass it along once you were well into adulthood.

I'm going to change that. I'm going to start a new tradition.

Scarlet pulled a snaker swab out of a jar and dabbed it in the goo-balm.

My daughter, if I ever have one, will get the dreams-cape.

She swirled the swab around her nosehole lining then plunged it in. She worked it around and when she pulled it out, it was covered in black grime.

And we can use the nasty cloak for a doormat or for a dog bed or something.

Scarlet tossed the swab in the wastebasket and saw the cloak reflected in the vanity mirror. "I'm a grownup now, and I can wear what I want." She went to the closet. At the front hung her favorite item of clothing, at least for the moment: a thin white satin jacket she'd appliquéd with black and red corpse flowers.

I'll just tell them I forgot the cloak. Scarlet pulled her Old Skull retro leather shoulder bag off its closet peg and started back upstairs.

"See ya later, Chucky, ..." she called to the moldfish. Chucky's dorsal fin cut the top of the water like a miniature shark's and

disappeared back into the tank-murk. Scarlet thought of Harvey Teeth and Grandma. She stopped on the stair and looked back at her bed, back at the hideous heap of cloak, unable to stop Grandma's story from invading her brain. Despite Scarlet's loathing of the cloak, Grandma's story about that very cloak was pretty awesome. And it seemed to get better each time she told it. Which was often.

"I remember my thirteenth unearthday..." she would always start. "I got my cloak and longboard and I hitched a ride on the back of a farmer's cart out to the coast. I went right to the beach and got into my dry suit. Nothing worse than a soggy zombie, eh Scarlet? Well, I paddled out and right away I saw a tasty wave. I tried to drop in, but I pulled an epic TOAD, which means..."

"Take Off And Die!" Scarlet would chime in.

"Right-o," said Grandma. "That was bummer number one. Bummer number two was..."

"Harvey Teeth!"

"Right said, Undead," said Grandma. "The old sharkie. *CHOMP!* Sucker bit me in half. I swam after him. *POW!* I punched him in the nose. *SWACK!* He smacked me in the head with his tail. *PTWANG!* I was dazed. I was confused. I was crazed. And I was not amused. Old Harvey, though, he just swam off laughing, with my legs poking out of his mouth like toothpicks."

“So, I bodysurf the whitewash up to the shore. My guts are falling out all over the place. The dry suit’s in shreds. I’m trying to hold myself together, but I’m getting sand all up where it shouldn’t go. Anyway, I kinda slither-slimed up to where my stuff was and I wrapped my lower half in the cloak. I’m sitting there wondering what to do, when up lurches the handsomest hunk of manzombie I ever saw. And you know what he said to me?”

Scarlet *did* know. “He said, ‘You got guts, girl. And if you’re half the woman I think you are, we’re going to have one whoooole lot of fun.’”

“He did indeed. And he carried me up to Pick-A-Part so I could buy a new pair of legs. Same ones I have now. He asked me to the luau on the beach that night, and there were tiki torches, haggis appetizers, and everybody was singing. It was wonderful. Now every time I eat a haggis,” said Grandma Bone, “I remember that night. I tell you, you ain’t really lived till you’ve been bitten in half.”

Scarlet stood on the stairs as the reverie faded.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.” She grabbed the red cloak and stuffed it in her Old Skull bag. “Hurry, Scarlet,” her father called. “The best haggi will be gone...”

Chapter 4

forewarned is forearmed

What are the three rules for traveling alone?" asked Dr. Sigmund.

Daisy plucked microscopic bits of dandruff, lint, and skinflakes off Scarlet's jacket while Scarlet shifted her weight from one sequined sneaker to the other and stared at the entryway ceiling. "Be on time," she yawned. Scarlet felt stuck in an in-between state, not wanting to hang around the house any longer, but not thrilled about Project Haggis, either.

"Yes. Get to Grandma's by five. Party at six. Rule number two?" asked Dr. Sigmund.

"Stay on the path." Daisy pulled Scarlet's bangs behind her ears.

"Yes. You'll be fine in the woods. When you're in the market, the stay-on-the-path rule means stay away from the back stalls. Last rule?"

“Don’t talk to strangers,” said Scarlet.

Daisy licked her thumb and rubbed a smudge of dirt off Scarlet’s cheek. “Close,” she said. “Don’t talk to *strange* strangers.”

Daisy stood back and regarded Scarlet, biting her lower lip. “You really do look grown-up,” she said.

“When you get to the market,” continued Dr. Sigmund, “get in the haggis line right away because it’s probably going to be long.”

What can I get for five bones? Maybe an accessory. A broach? A bracelet?

“And Darling,” said Daisy, putting her hands on her daughter’s shoulders. “Try to focus. Remember what your father said.”

“Forewarned is forearmed,” said Dr. Sigmund.

“Oh, and one other thing,” said Daisy, “Keep an eye out for your nose.”

“It’s easier than keeping a nose out for your eye,” said Dr. Sigmund, smiling.

It was true. Zombie body parts sometimes got separated from their owners, but they had an amazing homing instinct. It was quite common to be out in a field or a back alley of Plainfield or in the forest and see a hand or a foot crawling toward home. Scarlet thought of her own nose, lost long ago on a first-grade field trip in the forest. She imagined it lying sad and alone, trying to move itself with little nostril

flarings but not getting very far. Or worse, slowly digesting in the belly of a wild animal, like a bear or a wolf. Her parents kept wanting to take her to Pick-A-Part, the body part store, to get a new nose. But Scarlet held out. She wanted to give the nose a little more time. She wanted to feel whole from her own parts, not someone else's hand-me-down.

"One more thing," said Dr. Sigmund. He took off his watch and handed it her. "So you can keep track of time."

Daisy forced a jar into Scarlet's other hand. The wet and writhing mass inside was partially obscured by the label, which read: *Prime Time Snackin' Slugs*. "These will give you energy," said Daisy.

Scarlet stuck the jar of slugs in her shoulder bag along with the cloak and strapped on the watch. Something shifted inside her. Just for a moment, she imagined she was outside her body. It was like a daydream, but different, too. She saw herself through Daisy and Dr. Sigmund's eyes, feeling how they would feel saying goodbye to her. All of a sudden, she felt a surge of love for her parents. She clasped them both in a hug. "Thanks, Mom and Dad."

They squeezed her back.

"Don't muss your hair, now," said Dr. Sigmund gently.

"Do you feel ready?" asked Daisy.

She looked up at them and shook her head. "I'm a little sc-

I mean nervous.”

Dr. Sigmund squeezed her shoulder. “That’s normal,” he said.

“Growing up isn’t a bad thing,” said Daisy.

“In fact,” said Dr. Sigmund, “it should be an adventure.”

“But it is a bit scary sometimes,” finished Daisy.

Scarlet nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. “See you tonight,” she said. And with that, she was out the door.

Dr. Sigmund closed the door softly behind her. He and Daisy looked at each other. Neither one knew what to say. Dr. Sigmund unsnapped his jawbone. The CLACK-*click* sounded loud in the empty house. He stood for a moment staring at his wrist. It looked bare without the watch. Daisy wrung her empty hands together.

“That’s it, then, isn’t it?” said Daisy. “Our girl’s grown up.”

Dr. Sigmund nodded. He shook himself and holstered the jawbone.

They lurched back toward the kitchen.

Chapter 5

zombies roam the street

In front of the Bone family brownstone, Plainfield Avenue was clogged with zombies. Zombies teetering and tottering, wobbling and weaving, schlepping and shuffling down the cobbled, mobbed, and mudpuddled promenade. At their feet crawled stray parts trying to find their way home. The fingers of loose arms pulled themselves persistently ahead. Heels dug in and flexed legs forward. Ears and noses advanced with tiny flexings.

Scarlet at the top of the stoop, threw back her shoulders and inhaled the smell of mold and rot and putrescence. It smelled as wonderful and dangerous as freedom. “Hi, Mrs. and Mr. Festerson,” she waved to a couple walking by. “How’s the Brainforest Cafe?” asked Scarlet. The Festers stopped.

“Oh, hello Scarlet,” said Mungo Festerson. Scarlet noticed that his suit was worn thin in several places. “Bring your folks by. We’ve

got a new special: country-fried brainsteaks.” Swillda Festerson told Scarlet how the gravy was an insect-reduction sauce. “Never the same thing twice,” she said. She had a tear in her dress. “It all depends on the bugs we harvest that day.” They chatted for a minute before lurching on.

Scarlet stepped down to the bottom stair of the front stoop as Mr. and Mrs. Sputum came gimping along in soil-stained dungarees and matching flannel work shirts, sleeves rolled up to their elbows. They were trying to contain the rolling-thunder chaos of their shod-dily clad boys — Roscoe, Loogie, Wocka-Wocka, Jethro, Pee-Wit, and Astro. The boys were a whirling mass of limbs. They punched, kicked, noogied each other’s hair into tousled knots, and played keep-away with each other’s ears. Except for Scarlet’s classmate Astro. “Hi, Astro,” Scarlet said. “How are the humans treating you?” He looked up from his book — *Night of the Living Living* — flushed, and gave her a shy hello.

Scarlet lurched into the street, falling in behind the Gallowses, Hallowses, and Oozes, all arrayed in fine suits and dresses, shambling in an orderly line with their children clustered behind them. “Morning, guys,” said Scarlet to Sparkle and Spangle Hallows. Scarlet didn’t expect a reply and she didn’t get one. Those girls didn’t talk to Scarlet in the Threadheads, unless it was to mock her beadwork. So it didn’t

surprise her that their only response now was to sneer. Scarlet looked closely at their capes and boas and hats, trying but failing to find anything wrong with what they were wearing. *That's okay, I'll be the envy of the school after I get my dreams-cape.* Scarlet did notice that Mrs. Ooze was lurching along on yet another new pair of designer legs. Scarlet examined the legs closely, and giggled when she realized that the left one was longer than the right.

Behind her, Squire Cerebellum Augustus Stubbs hustled along — around and past the slower-moving zombies. “Excuse me, pardon me,” he kept muttering, consulting, as always, his oversized neckwatch. That reminded Scarlet to check her father’s watch, hanging loosely off her wrist. 9:45 a.m.

Scarlet passed the last of the mold-dappled brownstones of the Festerings, Plainfield’s most fashionable neighborhood (at least that’s what her mother always said). She dodged mounds of rancid rubbish, squirming squads of slugs, and passels of rats, including one that seemed to have two heads and a brass earring. She took in all the strange wonder of Plainfield and celebrated herself and sang herself down the road. She pulled a slug from her snack jar and sucked on it, feeling that all was right in her world.

That would soon change.

Chapter 6

a friend who looks like an enemy

The crowds thickened as she moved along. Scarlet found herself squeezed and jiggled and jostled. “Hey, careful,” she said to no zombie in particular. “Ow. Watch it!” The press of zombies grew tighter. “Mmpf. Careful... whoops!” Scarlet heard a *rrrrrip* as she fell to the street. Her first thought was, *Oh, no. My arm just came off.* But it wasn’t her arm. It was her satin jacket, torn at the shoulder — right through a corpse flower. Scarlet didn’t have time to dwell on it because she was on the ground, being kicked and bashed by passing feet and knees. *Thunk.* “Hey.” *Whoomp.* “Ow.” *Clunk.* “Watchit.” Zombies apologized as they stepped over her, but none stopped to help. She tried to get up and was knocked back down. She felt a pang in her left knee and she saw what had tripped her. A stray arm.

“This is your fault!” she yelled, grabbing the arm. It immediately began poking her face. “Chill, Pokey,” she scolded the arm, turning

her face away. Scarlet felt two hands grip her shoulders. She tried to squirm away. They gripped her tighter. Swiveling her head, all she could see was that the arms lifting her to her feet were encased in an unfashionable blue-checked work shirt. She collected herself and blew the hair away from her forehead. When she turned around, the zombie who'd helped her was gone.

Scarlet shambled to the edge of the street, panting. By this time, Pokey the stray arm had started pinching her butt, so she stuffed him in her shoulder bag. "You're grounded, Mister." She took a quick inventory of herself. Torn jacket. Ragged hair. Gashed left knee. Nothing Grandma's sewing, some hair tamer, and a dollop of skin spackle couldn't fix.

She looked up. The Plainfield Sanitary Market hulked above her, its blunt, mossed facade concealing a palace of wonders. Scarlet lurched toward it with the arm still twisting inside her shoulder bag. The market was an old cattle warehouse that had been converted over time into a maze of shops and stalls where both Plainfielders and out-of-town zombies gathered each day to sell everything from home-grown produce to homemade skin remedies, magic tricks, knife sharpeners, tickets to local shows, and blocks of wood carved into adorable bears. Lace doilies, wooden spoons, brass pots, sawdust firelogs, stove pipes, tool kits, shovels, spades, and other gardening

tools, plows, fruits and vegetables, gut jerky, mystery bags of body parts (the price was low, but you never knew what size you were going to get) and more. The market was a reeking, rowdy counterpart to the more upscale shops downtown.

A tsunami of sensations rushed over Scarlet. The smell of leather and lacquer from the craft stalls. The *clinka-binka* and *clanga-banga* of the jewelsmiths snipping silver and hammering brass. The harangue of shopkeepers and artisans shouting “best deals” or “one of a kind” or “fresh ‘n’ tasty molded goodness.” Buskers and bug mongers. Acrobats and artifacts. Shouts from the limb-menders and brainbakers and bedmat vendors and broom makers. Clouds of cleaning solvent stenches mixed with the aroma of zombie perfumes. Scarlet breathed in the smell of fetid fungi, tainted tubers, spoiled sardines, rancid rump steaks, and ripe tripe.

And, oh, the smell of brains, brains! Rising up from the Old Plainfield Brain Yard. Brains pickled and poached; blackened and barbecued; pan-fried, deep-fried, and stir-fried; canned and candied; caramelized and tenderized; dipped and whipped; pan-seared and mustard-smeared; marinated and disintegrated; boiled, broiled, and oiled; breaded and braised; baked and basted; grilled and chilled; honey-glazed and mayonnaised; decayed, sautéed, home-made... and raw.

Scarlet grew dizzy with delight. She headed for The Mighty Offal, Chunk Grissom's haggis stand. A signboard helpfully showed what offal was (animal innards) and haggis (a sheep's heart, liver and lungs stuffed into its stomach). You could buy the haggis prepared whole or you could buy it by the piece ("some assembly required").

Chunk was a short zombie who wore a tuxedo and stood atop an overturned spleen crate handing out the haggi as fast as he and his son, Chunk Jr., could wrap them up. Chunk Jr. was a classmate of Scarlet's, and as far as she could tell, the only thing he loved besides helping his dad sell haggi was exploring the woods. Scarlet noticed he was dressed in faded yellow overalls that had been patched and sealed many times. He brightened when he saw Scarlet.

Chunk Sr. sang in a roaring baritone to entertain his customers.

My offal's awful — delicious that is.

Everyone knows how nutritious it is.

But they don't know how auspicious it is.

This is what offal all wishes it is.

Scarlet's face fell when she saw the line. It wound halfway through the market. She looked at her watch and heard a commotion as Tom Femur took a stumbling step backward after being pushed by the girl standing in front of him.

"Stop squishing me!" the girl yelled.

Scarlet's spirits rose when she saw that the girl was a fifth grader she sort-of knew from school.

"Hey," Scarlet yelled, "hey, Hugga Bear."

The girl gave a toss of her mold-slimed hair. Slowly chewing a massive wad of bubble cud, she turned and squinted at Scarlet.

"Hi, Hugga! How's it going?" Scarlet shambled toward her, ignoring the disapproving stares of the zombies in the line. The girl was wearing a pair of cutoff jeans and a faded sweatshirt, upon which she'd hand-painted a bear paw. It matched the hand-carved bear-totem necklace she wore. The girl was barefoot and Scarlet saw that her feet were different sizes. The left foot was size six, Scarlet guessed. The right looked like a size nine. *Total hand-me-down.* She tried not to stare, but couldn't help it.

"Are your feet..."

"Yep," said the girl. "Why do you care?"

Scarlet glanced up and down the line. "I was wondering," she said loudly, "what you thought of my dress?"

"What do I think? Huh. Here's what I think," said the girl. She pointed her finger at her open mouth, and made a barfing sound.

Scarlet moved closer and said in a low voice, "Listen, I have a favor..."

The girl cut her off. "Did you call me 'Hugga Bear'?"

“Um, yeah. I thought you were called that.” Scarlet shifted from one foot to another.

“Actually,” the girl blew a bubble the size of a head and popped it. “I hate that nickname. That’s what your fashion... fash ’n’ bash... fash-ist... friends call me.”

“Oh, they’re not my fr— and, hey, we’re called the Threadheads.”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

“What do you want to be called? Scare Bear? Teddy Bear? Right to Bear Arms?”

“How about none of those. Do you like being called Noseless? Smell if I Know? Shnozzle Tov? I.Don’t Nose?”

“No. Call me by my name. Scarlet.”

“Okay, Scarlet. Call *me* by *my* name. My real name.”

“What is it?” asked Scarlet.

“Moldylocks. Moldylocks LaMort!”

Scarlet looked at her watch, starting to worry, just a little bit, about the time. “Moldy. Locks. Will you give me cuts?”

Moldylocks munched her bubble cud. “Maybe.”

“You like slugs?” Scarlet reached into her shoulder bag, avoided Pokey’s grabbing hand, and pulled out the snackin’ slugs. She held the jar out to Moldylocks to offer her one.

Moldylocks took the whole jar.

Scarlet went to step in front of Moldy, but Moldy stopped her and jerked her thumb behind her. "Backsies."

Scarlet stepped in front of Tom Femur, who immediately turned to the zombie behind him, Holly Wormhole, and said, "Save my place." Before she could think, Scarlet felt two massive hands grip her under the arms and carry her along — past Tso Delicious, past Beyond Be-Leaf, past Phartball's Phabrics — past stall after stall after stall until they reached the back of the line. Tom Femur set her down. "You seem like a nice girl," he said. "But the Mighty Offal is a backsies-free zone." He chortled and walked around the corner and back to his spot in line.

Scarlet stood there in her torn satin jacket, ragged hair, and gashed knee feeling snackless and ashamed.

There was a moment when Scarlet could have prevented all the trouble that came later. She could have made the choice to stay at the back of the line, trudging slowly toward the haggis counter listening to Chunk Grissom Sr. sing his haggisy songs, playing out fantasies of capes in her lovely noseless head.

She could have and she may have, if Jeminy Stinkpit hadn't come around the corner with LuAnn Fumarole and Sparkle and Spangle Hallows. Scarlet slid behind the portly zombie in front of her, hoping

the girls hadn't seen her. She couldn't help feeling jealous of LuAnn's new patent-leather pumps. It just made her feel worse, especially since her sneakers were muddy and had shed a few sequins.

The girls had seen her.

A twisted little smile appeared on Jeminy's face and she stopped the others and said in a loud voice, "There she is girls, that's our vice president. Always making a statement." She paused to let the other girls' laughter die down. "And the statement today is: How to dress like a dork."

Scarlet slipped out of line and hurried around a corner. She ducked into a stall selling cart-wheel grease, a stall she was sure the Jeminy gang would never enter. Good thing, too, since she got some grease on the hem of her dress. It was when she left the stall that she saw it: the dreams-cape.

She was about to get distracted, and because of her one little distraction, her day, her future, and the future of everyone in Plainfield took a swerve in a direction no zombie ever expected, even in their wildest daydreams.

Chapter 7

an enemy who looks like a friend

The dreams-cape was displayed at the front of the Elysian stall. It stood on a little pedestal ringed with tea candles. *I'll come back for the haggis later. The line will be shorter.* Scarlet shambled closer to the cape, which shimmered black and white in ivy-pattern arabesques. It looked durable, but gossamer and gauzy, too, as it swayed slightly in the little drafts of air that eddied through the market. Scarlet edged up to it and peered closely. But much as she stared, she couldn't get the patterns to hold still. They kept wanting to swim and dance and swirl.

The effect was hypnotic. Scarlet clutched her hands to her chest and felt like she was going to decompose on the spot. She bent over and squinted at the price tag, clipped gently to the cape's sleeve. Scarlet sagged. "Still a hundred," she moaned. She opened her coin purse and counted out the coins. "Twenty. All I have is twenty. And the haggis

will be fifteen."

She opened up the shoulder bag and frowned at cloak-nasty wadded inside. "Some unearthday." Pokey seemed to like it. He'd pulled it around himself and appeared to be sleeping.

Scarlet gave a last, longing look at the dreams-cape and checked the haggis line. Groan. It had gotten even longer. *I can't get back in line, anyway, not while Jeminy Stink-o Pit-o might still be there.* Scarlet began to meander. She imagined sauntering in to the next Threadheads meeting wearing the cape. *Oh my gosh, Jeminy would poop hamsters.* Scarlet giggled, looking around to make sure she hadn't said that out loud. *If I were walking around in that cape, I bet people wouldn't even recognize me. I'd be like a whole new zombie. People would know I was somebody amazing, somebody smart and beautiful and glamorous. I want that cape. I deserve it! It's my unearthday!*

Scarlet looked up. Without realizing it, her sequin-sneakered feet had taken her to the back of the market. "Oh," she started. She turned to go back to more respectable shops in the center when something caught her eye — a *B* and an *S*, part of a sign, and one fantastic feather. She stared at the sign. "Barnaby B's BoaS. Imported Organic Neckcessories." Scarlet's mouth formed a little "o" of surprise.

The stall was small, but it was gloriously overstuffed with feather boas of every imaginable variety. And some unimaginable ones. The

feathers were from all kinds of birds. Birds she knew: robin, starling, hummingbird, turkey, crow, finch, hawk, vulture. Birds she'd heard of: egret, heron, kingfisher, eidolon. Birds that hadn't existed for thousands of years: archeopteryx and the quintilidon. And the artistry! Mixes and weavings of greens and reds and blacks. Winged mosaics. A massive boa made entirely of peacock plumage. A tiny one fashioned from hummingbird hair. Duck-feather boas for rainy days. Bower bird boas bedecked in charms and trinkets. Pigeon-feather boas for zomba workouts.

An idea popped into Scarlet's head: *I might be able to afford one of these. It IS my unearthday!* Before she knew it, she was browsing a rack of moderately priced boas and her entire world had been reduced to just herself and these feathers. And one other creature.

"Well, well, there's a neck in need of feathering if ever I saw one," said a superslick voice from over her shoulder. Scarlet turned. The shopkeeper was tall, mysterious, and *different*. He had dark eyes, a massive nose, and a tidy goatee. His head was wrapped in a silk scarf studded with wolfstones. He stood up off his stool and came around his little counter toward Scarlet. He was sinewy and moved like a dancer. Not a plodding-clogging zombie-style dancer, but like an acrobat. She felt uneasy for a moment, though she wasn't sure why. Then she saw his boa — bright sky blues interwoven with crimson

feathers. Parrot juxtaposed with emu next to kiwi interspersed with oriole. Here was a man who knew his fashion! The uneasy feeling disappeared. She wouldn't remember it until much later in the day. But by then it would be too late.

"Do I know you?" asked Scarlet.

"No, but I can see you are a *rara avis*."

"A what?"

"A rare bird. The rarest of all, in fact: a woman of fashion."

"A woman?" Scarlet blushed happily.

"Aren't you?"

"Well... I guess I am today," said Scarlet. "It's my unearhtday."

"Well, felicitations *in excelsis*."

"What?"

"Congratulations to the utmost. It is no common thing, becoming a grownup."

"Nobody else seems to be noticing," said Scarlet, glowing.

"Most zombies don't see anything but themselves."

"Who *are* you?"

"Behold, if you will, Barnaby B. Wolf." He bowed deeply. "My feet are fashionably booted. My suit jacket is perfectly suited. Fashion's my game. Note my bowler. My vest. The many ruffles of my ruffled shirt." He gestured with his gloved hands as he spoke. "Note,

especially, how the boa ties it all together. See how I twirl my cane in the air. How I move without care. How I... what's this?" He leaned over, reached to her ear and pulled out a frankenbeetle, wriggling angrily. "...see how I can find treasure anywhere."

Scarlet was enchanted. She took the beetle from his paw and popped it in her mouth. She'd forgotten how hungry she was, and how slugless. The beetle was crunchy on the outside with a soft, chewy center. She grinned. Barnaby Wolf flashed a little half-smile back at her, a smile full of slobber and teeth. *My, what big teeth he has.*

"So, my dear..."

"... Scarlet."

"So, my dear Scarlet. I daresay a boa would complement your satin jacket perfectly." He glanced down to where it was torn at the shoulder. "Tear or no."

Something in the way he said it made Scarlet trust him. She could see it in his eyes. *What big eyes he has.*

"Actually, that's not the worst part of my unearthday."

"No?"

"Not even close. My parents want me to wear this." Scarlet reached into her bag and pulled out a corner of the lumpy, stinky, nasty cloak.

Barnaby threw up his paws and wrinkled his nose. *What a big*

nose he has. “What kind of carcass is that?”

“It’s a cloak.” She leaned in and whispered, “A hand-me-down.”

“Ghastly!”

“I know!” Scarlet stuffed the cloak back in her bag and zippered it closed. “Some unearhtday, huh?”

“Well, maybe we can make it a bit better, starting now.” Barnaby steered Scarlet to a rack of moderately priced boas.

“I don’t know,” said Scarlet. “I mean they’re beautiful, but I don’t think I can afford them. These all cost ten bones.”

“What’s your budget, Dear.”

“I have to buy a haggis. That’s another thing! Why am I doing chores on my unearhtday?”

“The injustice flabbergasts me,” he agreed.

“So I can only spend five.”

“Well, we can make that work. Why don’t you take your pick. Any boa in the store. Yours for five.”

Scarlet was stunned. “Really?” She rushed to hug Barnaby and on an impulse she said something to him, “Would you like to come to my party?”

“I would love to,” he said. And when he said it, a smile twitched away at the corner of his very toothy mouth. “Just tell me where the festivities are taking place,” he said.

Scarlet exclaimed over every boa in the stall as she and Barnaby talked about fashion and feather boas and how difficult it was to grow up misunderstood. Barnaby said he'd love to come speak at a Threadheads meeting the next time he was in town. Hours passed.

Scarlet's feet eventually took her back toward the center of the market, her neck decorated by a new feather boa. It was mostly black with hints of red — raven and cardinal.

At long last, the line to the haggis stall was short. Scarlet found herself almost disappointed. She would love to have shown off her new boa to Jeminy, but the market was getting ready to say goodbye to another busy day and zombies were headed home. Chunk Grissom was singing more hoarsely now to the last customers of the day.

I've got guts and I've got stuff.

Stop your shopping, I'm enough.

Always tender never tough

Get yourself up off your duff

I won't give you any guff.

You'll like my guts and love my stuff!

Scarlet smiled. She didn't know if Chunk was singing about the haggi or himself. When she arrived at the counter, Chunk Jr. was waiting for her. He looked exhausted but happy.

“Nice necklace!” he said.

“Necklace?” she snorted. “It’s a custom imported feather boa. But how would *you* know that.”

He looked surprised, then embarrassed. “Oh, right. A boa!” he laughed. “Like a snake, right?”

Scarlet snorted. “Can I just get a haggis?”

Still somewhat confused and a little hurt, Chunk Jr. lowered his voice and said, “Sure. I saw you earlier and I saved you the best one. That wasn’t really nice of Mr. Femur, carrying you to the back of the line like that.”

Scarlet stroked the feathers on her boa and stared at Chunk Jr.

“Right,” said Chunk Jr. He retrieved a haggis — firm, lumpy, and massive. “This is our signature offering,” he said, as he wrapped the haggis in butcher paper and tied it up with twine. “The mondo-haggis.”

“Nice,” said Scarlet, barely looking at it.

After she paid him and put the mondo-haggis in her bag on top of the cloak, he pulled a second, tiny, package out of his pocket and set it on the counter.

“I don’t need anything else,” she said, turning away.

“It’s a present,” he said. “Happy unearthday.”

“Thank you! How did you know?”

“I heard you talking in class.”

“Is it a broach? A pendant? Jewelry? I love accessories.”

“Uh... it’s sort of an accessory.”

Scarlet tore open the package and froze.

“It’s not mine. Not even close.” She shoved the package back at him, whirled away, and lurched to the exit of the market.

She was shocked to discover it was almost dark outside. She looked at her father’s watch. *Four o’clock? How’d it get to be four?!* The streets were almost empty — just a few zombies lurching home. There were a few limbs on the street, but they were blown-down tree limbs, not limbs from bodies. Even the strays seemed to have wandered off or found their homes. The evening was getting itself ready to bring down a terrific chill. Scarlet wrapped the boa tight around her neck. It wasn’t as soft as she thought it would be. And it certainly didn’t keep her warm. But it was beautiful in the fading light. “I’m supposed to be at Grandma’s in an hour,” she muttered. “Dang it Moldy! If you had let me cut in line I’d be at Grandma’s by now. Oh, and thanks for insulting me.”

Scarlet thought about that for a moment.

“But I called her a name first,” she said aloud. “It was my fault.”

Then she thought about Chunk Jr.

“You still have time,” a voice called behind her.

Scarlet wheeled around. The only zombie she could see was a

wiry old man leaning on a broom looking directly at her. He wore patched overalls and a long-sleeved blue-checked work shirt with his name sewn on a patch: "Carl." There was a lump wiggling in his back pocket.

"Time for what?" she asked.

"Time to do the right thing."

"What's that?"

"I don't know," he smiled. "But I bet *you* do."

"Argh, I don't have time!" She rushed back into the market anyway.

Chunk Jr. was wiping the last of the haggis bits off the counter while his father loaded empty wooden display racks into the family horse cart. He looked at Scarlet but didn't say anything. His eyes were red.

"I, I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't even try it on. Do you still have it?"

He nodded once.

"Can I... can I see it again?"

He pulled the gift out of his pocket and handed it to her.

It was a nose. An old woman's nose, veiny, warted, and bulbous. Scarlet held it over her nosehole anyway.

Chunk Jr. laughed. "I guess not!" he said. "I don't know what I

was thinking.”

Scarlet laughed, too. “I just wanted to make sure. I thought maybe the weather had been a little rough on it.” She touched her boa absently. “I also wanted to ask if you wanted to come to my party.”

Chunk Jr. swallowed. Too surprised to speak, he managed a nod.

“Okay. My Grandma’s. Six o’clock. You know where she lives?”

He did.

“Oh, and you don’t need to change. Come as you are.”

She regarded the nose, trembling in the palm of her hand. “Don’t worry, Sniffy, I’ll find a home for you.” She put Sniffy in the shoulder bag with Pokey. “Bye Chunk! And thanks.”

Scarlet headed into the night — a night full of teeth.

Chapter 8

night descends on scarlet

Scarlet kicked at branches as she trundled through the dimming streets. Gas streetlamps spat to life but their flames were feeble flickers against the frigid lid of evening. She adjusted her shoulder bag — heavy now with Pokey, Sniffy, the cloak, and the mondo-haggis. She tucked the boa snugly around her neck, hunched into her jacket, and headed out of the safe confines of town toward the mysteries of the forest.

Plainfielders could always get an argument started by claiming that Plainfield was a city. Of course, they could get an argument started in the other direction if they claimed it was a town. The answer was that it was both. It all depended on which way you were headed. Plainfield felt like a city if you were walking parallel to Plainfield River along the North Shore. The Bone family lived near the east end of town in the Festerings, a neighborhood of stately, time-splotched

brownstones. Walking west from the Festerings, the streets soon bustled with houses and shops and energy as you approached the Steamin' Heaps, with its funky cluster of cafes and boutiques. After the Heaps, you came to North Tendon (the government-and-commercial district), which eventually gave way to Ptonk, where the Plainfield Sanitary Market stood — squat, vast, and beloved. Across the river lay South Tendon and the Stubbs Factory, as well as Fleaknuckle — an unsavory district full of rumors and infection.

If you walked away from the river, north like Scarlet was doing, Plainfield felt like a town. The businesses of the Ptonk soon gave way to modest houses, which soon gave way to humble shacks, which soon turned into forest. In fact, some of the shacks on the fringes of town were so tumbledown, so moss-encrusted, that a zombie would have had to look really closely to determine just where a house ended and the forest began.

Scarlet shivered, and not just because she was cold or because the shacks were so unfashionable. It was more an itchy feeling of heading into the unfamiliar. The forest buzzed. It hummed. It crackled with sound. But while sounds of civilization had been comforting, the wood-sounds felt ominous. They were like sounds stripped of clothing, so all that remained was raw, stark, and primeval.

A deadpecker bird went *rat-a-tat-a-tat* on a moldwood tree.

Kero-keroak burst a buzz from a cluster of crickets. *Whaddup-whaddup-whaddup* croaked toads. Tiny mouths in a meadow of Venus flytraps snapped closed with a *click-click-click*. Scarlet heard the hissing drizzle of pine needles loosed from branches, the burble of sluggish streams, and the faint serenade of a snail parade.

Trudge, trudge, trudge into the dark forest. Scarlet breathed in the smell of swamp gas, plant rot, and little moist things gone foul. Night fell completely just as the spruces and moldwoods thickened overhead into a tunnel of tangled branches. A twig snapped in the distance. Off toward the foothills, a wolf howled. Close by, something heavy slithered wetly in the undergrowth.

Scarlet thought of her friends and their families, who'd soon be clomping along this same path to celebrate her unearthday. They'd be carrying thermoses full of Wakeful Dead coffee, holding lanterns overhead, and singing back the darkness.

Why was I so distracted? she wondered. Why didn't I listen? I would have been at Grandma's by now.

Scarlet tried to sing to rouse her bravery.

“The woods are undead,” she quavered, “with the sound of mucus.”

A raven squawked from a pinetop.

“With brains they still chew,” she sang a little louder, “for a

thousand years.”

A bolt of lightning lit the forest. A hundred pairs of eyes, wild-animal eyes, gleamed back at her. For a moment. Then they were gone.

“They infest my brain,” she sang, “with the sound of mucus.”

A low roll of thunder drummed in the mountains then rolled down on Scarlet’s head. The sound made her cower.

“My gut wants to spew each song it hears.”

The sky burst open and fat drops of rain began to pummel her. Her hair gave up pretending and drooped damp to her skull, her satin jacket soaked through and chilled her. Her boa sagged.

Scarlet shook a fist at the sky. “Okay, fine! You win!” She set her shoulder bag down in the mud and fished out the old cloak. Something tugged at the sleeve. “Get off!” Scarlet said, pulling Pokey off the cloak. He reached for her throat and she pushed him back into the bag and zipped it shut. Mostly shut.

“Oh, sorry!” she said as she caught his middle finger in the zipper. She pushed the finger back in and sealed up the bag.

Scarlet wrapped the cloak around her and pulled up the hood. She couldn’t see inside the bag, but Scarlet could feel Pokey continuing to wiggle angrily.

“What’s wrong with you?” she yelled. She stood up and scratched

her nosehole. “What is wrong with you?” she asked softly. She remembered something Barnaby had said. “*Most zombies don’t see anything but themselves.*” Opening the bag again as the rain began to pummel her, Scarlet reached in and held Pokey’s hand. He squeezed hard, like he was trying to crush her fingers. Scarlet waited. She clenched her teeth and with her other hand, began to stroke Pokey’s knuckles and sing.

Standing beside you, out here in the rain.

Feeling your hand crushing mine.

I feel your anger. I see you’re in pain.

How could I be so blind?

We’ve traveled together,

but always apart.

Still here you are by my side.

So now I come to you, with open arms.

Please don’t hold a grudge. I swear I won’t judge.

So here I am, with open arms.

I’m learning to see, to the inner zombie,

Open arms.

Slowly, very slowly, Pokey unclenched.

“You lonely Pokey? Is that it?” Scarlet smiled sadly. “Me too.”

Scarlet held Pokey in both her hands for a bit longer, then took

Sniffy and set her in Pokey's palm. Sniffy's nostrils flared rapidly then slowed as Pokey's fingers cradled her.

"Hang on, friends. We'll be at Grandma's soon."

Scarlet zippered the bag and slung it over her shoulder. As she walked through the storm toward Grandma's house, Scarlet didn't feel quite so afraid. She nestled into the cloak without realizing it as her feet squished along in her soaked sneakers. She barely noticed the thorny branches that overhung the path, the ones that before had clutched at her and torn her dress. The rain tried to get in, failed, and dripped harmlessly to the path. The wind picked up and the night deepened, but Scarlet stayed warm. The cloak-stink that had so bothered her before now seemed so comforting.

Scarlet passed Kobayashi Rockpile and the old cutoff to O'Putrid's pond.

She wondered about the presents she would soon get. *They're going to get me clothes! The dreams-cape. Maybe. And shoes, and necklaces, and bracelets. Jeminy is going to be so jealous...* Scarlet suddenly felt tired of thinking about Jeminy. To her surprise, she also felt tired of thinking about the dreams-cape.

The path rose as she trudged toward the Uplands and crossed Mollie Tinkle Creek. *Almost there.* At last she rounded a familiar cluster of cedars that hung heavily with scarves of moss and saw

Grandma's house.

Just barely.

Scarlet had been expecting to see the glow of lantern light spilling out into the yard, but the house was almost completely dark. There was only the faint flicker of a single candle from the downstairs hall.

Well, this fits. I wonder if she even remembered my unearhtday.

Some part of Scarlet sensed that something was out of place. Her skin began to crawl, and it wasn't from skinbugs.

She shambled nervously up the path.

Knock. Knock. Knock. "Grandma?... Grandma? It's me, Scarlet."

She peeked through the window beside the front door and saw a figure sidling unnaturally up the front hall. The thing was Grandma-shaped, and *not*. It was taller than Grandma. It moved with both agility and grace, like an acrobat after a feast. Still, even in the dim light, Scarlet recognized Grandma's beret and her billowy muumuu, cinched as always, with a macramé belt.

The front door flew open.

"Come in, come in, child. It's warm inside!" said the figure framed in the weak candlelight.

Scarlet stared at the collar of the muumuu. At the lone feather poking up from under the collar. An emu feather.

She took a step back, dumbfounded. "Barnaby?"

She didn't have time to scream. Barnaby swallowed her whole — cloak, feather boa, shoulder bag and all.

Down she slid.

Chapter 9

all the adventure scarlet can stomach

*M*y world has always been full of dark things, but I never really knew how beautiful they were until now — now that I may not see them again. I love Plainfield. How the market leaks shadows. How the houses spew moldstains. How the forest oozes gloom. How amazing the world is all the way through, especially at the end of the day when I go to sleep in my dirtbox and the sod covers me snug and the world goes

dark

darker

darkest.

Scarlet landed with a *plop* on the spongy floor of Barnaby's stomach. The darkness was total. *I think this is the first darkness I've never loved.* She got to her knees, reaching her hands tentatively out around her. Acidic stomach juice washed over her feet and splashed her shins. The

elasticky walls were close all around her, and gave to her touch. Scarlet felt herself sway and sat down. Barnaby must be moving through the house. This was crazier than anything Scarlet could daydream, and for the moment, she was too astonished to panic. Vegetable rinds, fish skeletons, and half-digested rodents bumped her thighs and knees. The cramped little stomach-cave smelled like braintruffles and... perfume. Low Tide No. 5.

Something grabbed her wrists.

Scarlet gasped and tried to pull away but couldn't. There was nowhere to go.

She felt a hand on her face. The hand was gentle, caressing. It touched her brow, her cheek, her nosehole.

"What the fungus! Braindrop?"

"Grandma? You're alive?"

"You betcha, Picklebutt! I just dozed off and didn't hear you come in. Happy unearthday!"

Scarlet leaned forward and hugged her grandmother.

"So how do you like being a grownup so far?"

"It's horrible! Chores, lines at the market, humiliation, disaster, my boa is a mess and... wait, what am I saying? What are we going to do?"

"I don't know, Scardy Girl. Whatcha got in mind?"

“Me? *You’re* the adult. I thought you would have an idea! We’ve got to do something. The guests are coming!”

“Hmm. Let me think for a minute.” Grandma Bone was silent. She held Scarlet’s hands in hers. “Well...” she said.

“Yes,” Scarlet leaned in closer.

“Ow!” said Scarlet, who felt a finger poke her chest. “I think Pokey got out.”

“No, that’s me,” said Grandma Bone. “Stop thinking with your head. Think *here*. Think from the inside, from your dead center.”

“How?”

“Just let the answer happen.” Grandma Bone poked her again. “What’s that I feel?”

“The cloak. Your old cloak.”

“Nice, but it feels lumpier than I remember.”

“That’s a feather boa I got today,” said Scarlet. “Well, it *was*.” Scarlet started to giggle crazily. She pictured how she must look. The boa a string of damp feathers hanging loosely off her neck. Her hair soggy. Her nosehole dripping snot. The old cloak wrapped around her. Pokey and Sniffy wiggling in their bag. Stomach juice soaking into her skin.

“What is it, Scarlet?” asked Grandma.

“I was just imagining what the Threadheads would think if they

saw me. They'd take one look and," she held her finger in front of her mouth and made a gagging sound, "they'd hurl."

The two of them held each other laughing and crying. Until Scarlet sat up suddenly.

"Grandma! That's it!"

Chapter 10

what goes down must come up

What's it?" sputtered Grandma.

"We'll get him to puke us out!"

"Great idea, Scarly. Tickle his epiglottis!"

"Is that the little dangly thing?"

"Yep. It always worked on your father. He'd swallow furniture polish all the time when he was little. He loved the taste (well, who doesn't?) but that stuff is poison. I don't know how many times I had to induce vomiting. Never from the inside, though. Still, it's worth a try."

Scarlet stuck her arm up Barnaby's throat to little effect. All she could feel was gullet stretching upward. *How did I ever squeeze through that?* she wondered. "It's no use," she said, pulling her arm back down. "My arm's not long enough."

“Maybe that’s why your father’s so cautious now,” said Grandma.

“What? Grandma! Help me think!” said Scarlet. “Wait, what?”

“He’s so cautious. You know how he’s always saying ‘forewarned...’”

“... is forearmed!” Pokey!” Scarlet reached into her shoulder bag and pulled him to her chest. “I need you, my friend.” She slowly unclenched his fingers and removed Sniffy. Pokey convulsed. Scarlet held him, singing softly. When he’d calmed down, Scarlet jammed him up Barnaby’s throat.

Scarlet heard Barnaby cough, but that was all.

“It’s not working!” moaned Scarlet.

“What does your dead center say?” urged Grandma.

“I don’t know,” Scarlet wailed. She put her hand inside her cloak, over her heart, over her boa. “This stupid, stupid boa!” she screamed, ripping a feather off, punching and punching Barnaby’s stomach.

She stopped. “Grandma, I have an idea.”

She stuck the feather in Pokey’s hand. He dropped it. Again she tried to give him the feather, and again he dropped it. And a third time.

Scarlet sobbed.

“Well, kiddo, got anything else in your bag of tricks?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Well, you’re just full of I don’t knows, aren’t you?”

I don’t knows. I don’t nose. I... She reached for Sniffy.

“Grandma, get ready. I’m going to take this feather and stick it in Sniffy’s nostril.”

“Which one?”

“Sniffy’s the nose.”

“I mean, which nostril?”

“I don’t know. Does it matter?”

“I doubt it.”

“Fine, the left nostril. Then, I’ll give Sniffy to Pokey to hold. He’ll protect her. I’m going to reach him up again so he can tickle Barnaby’s dangly spot and puke us out. Arm. Nose. Feather. Got it?”

“Got it! You go hurl!”

Scarlet climbed on Grandma’s shoulders and reached up as high as she could.

Barnaby felt a tickling in his throat. He felt a burning in his gullet. He felt a clenching in his belly. He wiggled and squirmed. Suddenly, he knew what was coming but was powerless to stop it.

Barnaby blinked.

Barnaby burped.

Barnaby barfed.

Chapter 11

totally grossome

Out gushed Scarlet and Grandma Bone in a wash of wolf goo. Pokey, Sniffy, the feather and the shoulder bag lay in a puddle of Barnaby B. bile. Grandma Bone jumped to her feet and wiped the slime out of her eyes. Scarlet unwound the tattered feather boa from her neck. Barnaby stood up unsteadily, moaning and clutching his stomach. "Hi-YA!" yelled Grandma Bone and kicked him in the wolfnuts. Scarlet tackled Barnaby with a *whoomf* and knocked the wind out of him. With Barnaby gasping, Scarlet tore his boa from beneath the nightshirt he was wearing. (She allowed herself a moment of regret for ruining such a beautiful fashion accessory.) She tied his forepaws behind him with his boa and bound his hindpaws with her own boa. Grandma Bone clutched him in a headlock and gave him a noogie all the way down the front hall. Barnaby squirmed and moaned in her undead grip. Scarlet opened the door and made a

sweeping gesture to the evening. The wind blew in the rain. Grandma tossed Barnaby out. He flew through the air and landed with a plop in the mud.

Time stopped on a scene Scarlet would never forget.

Barnaby lay thrashing at the feet of Daisy and Sigmund Bone. Behind them crowded a group of zombies arriving for Scarlet's party. Everyone leaned umbrella-first into the rain, with presents tucked under coats and cloaks and jackets. In the flashes of lightning and the glow spilling out Grandma's front door, Scarlet could make out faces she knew: the Chunk Grissoms, junior and senior, Spasm Jenkins, Retch Lardbelly, Tom Femur, Cerebellum Augustus Stubbs and his sons, the rockin' Stubbz Boyz, Moldylocks, Jack, Hansel and Gretel Gristle, and lots of other friends and family members, including a smirking Jeminy Stinkpit flanked by Sparkle and Spangle Hallows. Scarlet sighed. Jeminy did look amazing in her all-weather cloak and duck-feather boa.

Moldylocks stared down at Barnaby. "Totally grossome," she said. "Gross plus awesome," she explained to the confused faces around her.

Jeminy looked from Barnaby to Scarlet and back to Barnaby again. She crossed her arms and said sarcastically to the Hallows sisters, "Is that a cloak she's wearing, or a carcass?" The girls giggled as everybody

looked at Jeminy.

Just at that moment, Barnaby's fierce thrashings dislodged a great gob of worm-wiggly mud. It flew gently through the rain, landed smack on Jeminy's chin, and began to dribble down onto her oh-so-fashionable cloak. Moldylocks laughed. Jeminy, thinking it was Moldylocks who'd thrown the mudball, tackled her. The two girls commenced wrestling and writhing, pulling hair, muddying faces, and calling names. In a flash, Jeminy was kneeling atop Moldy's chest, a long rope of swaying spit dangling from her sneer to a point just above Moldy's right eyeball. Scarlet rushed in, catching the phlegm pendulum in her hand just before it landed. Scarlet wiped her hand on a corner of her cloak, pulled Jeminy off Moldy, and helped Moldy to her feet. Scarlet stood between the two girls as the zombies crowded around her.

Scarlet held up a corner of her cloak — a non-phlegmy corner — to Jeminy. "Here," she said. "Wipe." Jeminy cleaned her face.

Scarlet turned to Moldylocks. "You okay?"

Moldylocks scowled, but nodded. "Your parents ran into me and my mom today in town. After I saw you. Mom made me come."

"I'm glad you're here. I'm sorry about earlier. At the market. I wasn't very nice."

“Thanks. I shoulda let you have frontsies,” said Moldylocks. She leaned toward Scarlet and lowered her voice, “And I *do* like bears. I explore. But I haven’t found any. Yet.”

Scarlet looked at Moldy’s necklace, her bear-paw shirt, her mismatched feet and her mossy hair and said, “Who am I to judge?”

Moldylocks turned to Jeminy and said, “I didn’t throw it.”

Thunder rumbled.

“Hey, everybody,” yelled Scarlet, “are we going to have a party or we gonna stay outside and let our skin rot?”

The zombies laughed and started to move to the front door.

“Mom, Dad...” said Scarlet. “Can you grab Barnaby?” She started to lead the party forward.

“Scarlet...” called Daisy.

Scarlet knew what she was going to say before she said it.

“He’s gone.”

Chapter 12

what do you wish for when you have everything?

All that remained were two chewed-through boas and a trail of feathers quickly being blown into the night. *My, what big teeth he had*, thought Scarlet.

“I’ll go!” yelled Chunk Sr. “Spasm, Retch, come with me. Everybody else go inside.”

“Just let him go,” said Grandma as the other zombies streamed into her house. “I’ve had some experience with his kind and that wolf is halfway to the mountains by now. He won’t be back for a while. We’re safe.”

“We won’t go far,” yelled Chunk Sr. “I just want to secure the perimeter.”

A zombie turned from the porch to join the mini-posse. “I’ll join you,” shouted Dr. Sigmund.

Grandma turned to Scarlet. “Did he say ‘secure the perimeter’?

Who is he? Zombo?"

Scarlet laughed. "Grown-ups. What are you going to do?"

"Okay, boys," yelled Grandma to the men. "Just be back in time for unearthday braincake!"

High on the rooftop of Grandma's house, in the dry lee of the chimney, one creature observed the scene. He committed everything to his flawless memory. Once everyone had either gone inside or taken off in fruitless pursuit of Barnaby, he twitched his two sets of whiskers and shook the rain off his two heads. With a twitch of his right-right ear, the brass tag jangled softly. The thunder tumbled and he disappeared into the night.

Inside, every zombie was soon stripped of their soaked outer garments. Grandma built up the fire in the kitchen and Scarlet stoked the one in the front room. Together, they strung a roll of twine zigzagging across the downstairs rooms. Soon, coats and cloaks (and a feather boa or two) steamed from the temporary clotheslines. Zombies walked around in their camisoles, knickers, union suits, and tighty-whiteys. They chatted and laughed at themselves, sipping earl gray matter tea and Wakeful Dead lattes.

Grandma and Scarlet lurched into action, delivering trays of gut jerky and snackin' slugs, bowls of skin beetles, and containers of skin spackle for suppurating sores and scabbed skin.

The posse of perimeter-securers soon came back and got into the spirit of the party. Dr. Sigmund kissed Daisy. “We didn’t get too far,” he winked. “That braincake started to sound pretty good.”

Scarlet, returning from the kitchen with a massive tray of sliced mondo-haggis, paused to look around Grandma’s living room. For the first time in her undeath, she felt like she was seeing past superficial appearances — seeing zombies for who they were, not what they were wearing. The zombies she saw were kind, surly, funny, boring, irascible, stubborn, joyous, and for the most part, each a mix of all of those things and more.

The party kaleidoscoped into an array of colorful mini-conversations. Scarlet listened as she served the haggis.

Chunk Sr. talking to Phileas Batuta and Tom Femur. “It was the strangest thing. The entire boa stall was just packed up and gone.”

Moldylocks to Jack Gristle: “You’re full of mucus! Bears *do* exist.” Old Lady Poxball to Chunk Grissom Sr.: “Now, to get the best jerky, you gotta leave it in the smokehouse for a week...” Chunk Sr. to Old Lady Poxball: “Have you every tried your jerky in a haggis?”

Tug Singlebuttock was going on at length to a skeptical Kay Hamhock: “I know it sounds weird, but I saw lights in the sky. A giant house. You gotta believe me.”

Her science teacher, Mr. Sever, was talking to Constable Cruft.

“I’m telling you, the kids have been bringing in some strange creatures from the woods. Snakes with feet. Possums with extra pairs of hands. Archie Dunphee even said he saw a rat the other day with two heads. I’m telling you, it’s not natural.” The constable promised to watch things then quickly excused himself for another slice of haggis.

Daisy to Lyudmila Gallows: “I do think property values are going to go up even more this year.”

Anka Mastiff, the town fortune-teller, asked Phylidia Phartball if she’d noticed anything strange about the circus.

Dorothy J. LaMort! (the exclamation point was part of her name) stood beside the piano, gesturing to One Tuckerson and his younger brothers, Two and Three. “Have you boys done any musical theater? You’d be great in my next production.”

Spasm Jenkins, Retch Lardbelly, and Carl Nugget leaned together in a corner speculating about the wolf’s whereabouts.

Scarlet’s school friends — including Astro Sputum, Chunk Jr., and Moldylocks — and her nonfriends, including Jeminy Stinkpit, Sparkle and Spangle Hallows, Grim Gallows, and Fantabulous Ooze — clustered on the floor playing the board game Infection. Scarlet smiled as Chunk Jr. rolled an unlucky five and had to pantomime acquiring a virus where his toes tied themselves in knots. Jeminy smiled slightly at Scarlet. The smile looked sincere, but Scarlet

couldn't be sure.

Scarlet completed her circuit of the house and headed back to the kitchen when she felt a hand on her shoulder. "Nice going, Scarlet. You did the right thing today."

Scarlet looked at the hand. It was holding another hand. She suddenly remembered this zombie from the market — the blue checked workshirt and the wiggling lump in his back pocket.

"I'm Carl. We sorta met earlier. This is Carlito," he said. "My helping hand."

"Hi, Carlito," said Scarlet. The hand wiggled his fingers at her. "But we let the wolf get away, Mr. Carl."

"Ah, yeah. I wouldn't worry too much. We'll always have wolves. And if not, there'll be other monsters."

"Did I see you earlier today?"

"Maybe not. But I saw you a couple times. You did good. You got up and kept going when you fell. You went back and got the nose."

She remembered his blue-checked workshirt and smiled. "Thanks for helping me."

He nodded.

No sooner had she stepped into the kitchen than Grandma Bone shooed her out. "Just tell me how Pokey and Sniffy are doing!" laughed Scarlet.

"They're fine. Now, scoot!"

Scarlet skedaddled back to the front room to relax at last.

A *tink tink tink* sound rang through the house. It was Dr. Sigmund, tapping his jaw against his glass.

"Aynunh, aoo-aaahahah," he said.

He was met by baffled silence.

Daisy nudged him. "Honey," she whispered, "your jaw."

"Unhh. Nuhh." Dr. Sigmund put his jaw in. Click-CLACK. "Attention everyone, I'd like to sing Happy Unearthday to Scarlet -- the most grown up girl I know."

Daisy held a finger up, then traced a V in the air. "And a one and a two..."

"Happy unearhday to you," the voices of Plainfield sang.

"Cha-cha-cha!" yelled Grandma Bone, emerging from the kitchen with a freshly frosted braincake, glowing with candlelight.

"Happy unearhday to you..."

"Cha-cha-cha!" yelled Daisy.

"Happy un EARTH day, dear Scarlet..."

"Cha-cha-CHA!" yelled everybody.

"Happy unearhday... to... youuuuuu."

"Hi-YA," shouted Grandma Bone and Daisy together.
"Stinky socks!"

Grandma Bone held the cake, bright with candles, in front of Scarlet. "Make a wish."

Scarlet looked at the underwear-clad zombies gathered all around her and for a moment, didn't know what to wish for. She had everything she needed. Moldylocks pushed her way in front of Tom Femur, saying, "Stop squishing me."

'Then Scarlet knew.

Poof.

Chapter 13

the best things are ings

Daisy and Sigmund did indeed give her the dreams-cape. "We had to sneak in to the market after you left, Dear. Took you long enough!"

The Threadheads gave her a boa they'd made in the club. Each had contributed a feather.

Moldy's gift was her bear-totem necklace. And the jar of snackin' slugs she'd taken from Scarlet earlier.

Grandma handed Scarlet a wooden box about the length of an arm. Scarlet beamed and slowly slid the box lid open. Pokey and Sniffy lay in a nest of moss and straw, resting peacefully.

Scarlet hugged Grandma, then looked to Daisy and Dr. Sigmund. "Can I? Can I keep them?"

They conferred and quickly agreed. "You can," said Dr. Sigmund.

“Unless you find their selves,” said Daisy.

“Thank you! Thank you everyone.”

Her many friends filled the room with hoots and whoops.

When the cheers subsided, Grandma Bone said, “I’ve been undead a long time and I just want to remind you that the best gifts aren’t things. They’re *ings*.” She nodded toward the back of the room where the Stubbz Boyz were unzipping duffel bags.

“What do you mean?” yelled Tom Femur.

Grandma cackled. “Well, the best times I’ve ever had have been when I’ve been doing something that ended in I-N-G. Cook-*ing*, eat-*ing*, macrame-*ing*, surf-*ing*, and...” she held up one of her weatherbeaten hands, extending her index and pinkie fingers, “rock-*ing*!”

At that moment, there was the twang of a guitar, a rhythmic pounding on the drums, and a voice as mellow as beach waves filling the room. Abercrombie, Winthrop, and Bash Stubbs — also known as the Stubbz Boyz — were in the house and they were ready to rock.

“This is for you, Scarlet,” said Bash, and he began to sing.

*Dreaming of new clothes,
and finding her old nose,
Scarlet decided to ignore the rules.
She should have acted.*

*She got distracted,
looking at baubles and dreams-capes and jewels.*

“It’s true!” yelled Scarlet to much laughter.

The Boyz kicked into the chorus:

Wastin’ away down there inside of Barnaby.

Project Haggis was under assault.

*Zombies might claim
that there’s a wolf here to blame.*
*Scarlet knew
it wasn’t her fault.*

Zombies got up and began to dance. They shimmied and swayed in their skivvies, ducking under the drying coats and dresses.

*Feeling at wit’s end,
she found a new friend
with boas to help her accessorize.*
*She finally got haggis,
and schlepped through the forest,
heading for Grandma’s and one big surprise.*

“Don’t talk to strange strangers, remember?” yelled Dr. Sigmund while whirling Daisy around.

Wastin’ away down there inside of Barnaby.
Project Haggis was under assault.

*Zombies might claim
that there's a wolf here to blame.
Scarlet thought
"Well it could be my fault."*

"Last verse, everyone," said Bash. "Repeat after me." He led them through, line by line.

*Stuck in a wolf gut,
She went and kicked butt.
She had to do something or she would have died.
At last Scarlet grew up.
When Barnaby threw up.
Fashion ain't nothing when beauty's inside.*

"Everybody now," sang Bash.

*Wastin' away down there inside of Barnaby.
Project Haggis was under assault.
Zombies might claim
that there's a wolf here to blame.
Scarlet knew.
It so was her fault.*

The zombies erupted. "Happy unearhtday, Scarlet," said Bash. "Nice work today." They launched into their next song, "Hungry Like the Wolf."

The party went on and on into the night, with everyone eating and feasting and drinking and dancing — all those *ing* things that give life *mean-ing*.

Hours after, when everyone was worn out, they all piled out the door to head home together, as one big, safe, messy patchwork zombie family. But just before she left, Scarlet stood on the front porch and shared a moment with Grandma Bone.

“Well, Scarlet, how does it feel to be a grown-up?”

“Like an adventure,” laughed Scarlet.

“As it should,” said Grandma Bone.

Scarlet joined her friends and family for the walk home. She wore her new dreams-cape and her Threadheads boa underneath her old red cloak, her beautiful hand-me-down. The woods felt both more familiar and more dangerous now. She walked quietly behind her parents for a while, then pulled alongside Moldylocks.

“Want to know what I wished for?”

“Sure,” said Moldylocks.

“I couldn’t think of anything for myself, so I made a wish for you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I wished that you’d find some bears.”

“I dig it,” said Moldylocks. She grew thoughtful, then gave Scarlet

a questioning look.

“What?” asked Scarlet.

“You’re different.”

“I feel different.”

“You need a new name,” said Moldylocks. “Something strong.”

“Like?”

Moldylocks grinned. “Like *Scar*.”

Epilogue

may your morning bring rebirth

Scarlet made it most of the way home, but as they reached the edge of the Festerings, she was so tired that Dr. Sigmund had to carry her. With Daisy beside him, he carried Scarlet along the neighborhood, through the front door of the Bone brownstone, and, step by step, down to her cellar bedroom.

Dr. Sigmund lay Scarlet in her dirtbox and drew her cape and cloak around her. Daisy tucked Sniffy and Pokey's box under Scarlet's arm.

"I remember when this bed seemed so big for you," Dr. Sigmund whispered. "Time goes by so fast."

Daisy shambled quietly to the row of dirtmasks hanging by Scarlet's bed. She ran her fingers slowly along each, settling on the one decorated with glowing worms and dancing spiders. It was the first dirtmask she and Dr. Sigmund had ever bought their daughter.

Daisy snugged the mask over Scarlet's mouth and nosehole. It really was too small for her now — a child's dirtmask. Still, Daisy cinched the drawstring behind her head and whispered, "You always looked so peaceful in this one."

Dr. Sigmund thought of a nursery rhyme he and Daisy used to sing a long time ago. They sang it now as they buried Scarlet.

We'll scoop the dirt and dig the dirt.

You nestle snug into the earth.

May all your dreams be dark tonight.

And may your morning bring rebirth.

Scarlet let the dirt cover her, happy to let them think she was dreaming.

Coming Soon

Moldylocks and the Bear

We had so much fun writing *Scar and the Wolf* that we decided to write another adventure. Hold on to your limbs, because the next Plainfield Chronicles book is coming soon!



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Made in the USA
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Scarlet Bone is a zombie girl with one big problem.

It's not that she's missing a nose (zombie parts go missing all the time). It's not that she's turning 13 today and her parents just gave her a massive chore to do. It's not even the stray arm she found in the street — the one that's giving her so much trouble. No, Scarlet's problem is that she's about to end up on the wrong side of a wolf: the inside.

Welcome to the strange, yet strangely familiar world of the *Plainfield Chronicles*. In *The Plainfield Chronicles: Scar and the Wolf*, the series' debut novel, you'll find a story you recognize, but one you've never read before.

A girl's parents tell her she needs to take a special package to Grandmother's house, deep in the woods. She puts on her red riding hood and sets out, alone. She encounters a wolf, and reveals to him what she's doing and where she's headed. Later, she gets distracted on her journey and arrives late to Grandma's. Too late. *Grandma? Is that you?* Something seems amiss.

*What big ears you have.
What big eyes you have.
What big teeth you have.*

Scar and the Wolf is the *Little Red Riding Hood* for our time — one with zombies, music, and lost body parts just trying to find their way home.

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